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THE POLITICAL PROGRESS OF THE ENGLISH WORKINGMAN[†]

In common English parlance the term workingman has for some time been monopolized by the manual industrial worker. All others who will not be classified as gentlemen of leisure have had to find some other designation for their energies. They may be ministers or servants, assistants or laborers, but unless they drive a machine or handle a tool they are not workingmen.

How the industrial worker secured title to this simple and honorable appellation is a question which we can safely leave to the philologists. We are more concerned with the fellow whom it denotes. He has answered in his time to many names. Historically speaking he is the oldest kind of fellow on earth; or at least he is the kind of which we have the oldest record. He chipped the oldest stone implement in our museums, forged the oldest blade, molded the oldest pot. And the Lord alone knows how far behind these chance survivals of his handicraft his history ascends. To tell the whole story of his progress would involve telling the whole story of civilization, and nothing of that sort can be attempted here. Of his political progress the recorded tale is far briefer. It carries us, in England at any rate, no farther back than the Middle Ages, and most of it falls well within the compass of the last hundred years.

The medieval prototype of the modern industrial worker was the craftsman. He was then as he is now a townsman, though he certainly came from the country in the first place and he long preserved a healthy smell of the earth about him. It was in connection with the government of his town that he made his *début* into politics. At first he was a more or less accidental feature in an urban community mainly devoted to trade, a hewer of wood and a drawer of water for the merchants who ran the town in their own interests. Later as he grew in numbers he learned how to organize his strength and was able to contend with his masters for a share in the town government. In the long run he rather more than won his way, and long before the end of the Middle Ages

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he had become in the great majority of English towns the dominating element in municipal politics.

It is unfortunate that we know so little about this part of his history because it is clear from the results he achieved that he revealed early a capacity for politics of no mean dimensions. This much at least is certain that the original basis of his organization was industrial and that his political effort was directed through industrial channels. The English craft guild like the modern English trade union was not designed for political purposes, but like the trade union also, it could be made to serve.

In its early days the English craft guild furnished an excellent example of democracy in industry. It aimed to include everyone within the town who followed the same craft. Practically the only qualification for membership which it required was that of good workmanship. If apprentices and journeymen were not admitted to the full privileges of the guild it was merely because they were regarded as not having completed their technical education. Not every one of them eventually attained to the mastery of the craft. Not every Freshman for that matter gets his degree. But the assumption was that the apprentice would in time become a journeyman, and the journeyman in time a master. After all the only thing which really counted for much in medieval industry was handicraft skill. Capital was hardly necessary. The tools of the trade were few and cheap, power a matter of vigorous arms and legs, the shop a workman's bench in the front parlor and a sign above the street door. Given the technique, the equipment was easily found. And once an artisan was admitted to the guild the guild saw to it that he got his fair share of the local business. Equality of opportunity was one of the fundamental principles of its organization, and in the days when the market was limited by the town walls, when outside competition was rigorously excluded, when fashion was not the inconstant lady which she has since become, and when town populations just about held their own against plague, pestilence, and famine, equality of opportunity was not so hard to manage. The consequence was that the members of the craft stood upon almost an equal footing. Making allowances for individual variations in manual dexterity they all did much the same thing in much the same way. They purchased their raw material in the town market, manipulated it with the assistance of a few apprentices and journeymen in their little workshops, and sold the product over their counters. They were at once buyers and salesmen, shopkeepers and artisans, employers and workmen, owners and operatives. Since the prices at which they bought and the prices at which they sold, the wages they paid, the hours

they worked, and even the quantity and the quality of their finished products were all strictly regulated by guild ordinance, there was little play for competition and small chance for any craftsman to forge far ahead of his fellows. Very likely the system discouraged individual enterprise, but it made for equality and probably came as near to achieving a really democratic régime in industry as any system has ever come.

When such organizations began to interest themselves in local politics it was usually with a view to winning the municipal franchise for their own members. When they succeeded, and they generally did succeed, the master craftsman became the controlling element in the town government. No doubt he frequently abused his power in that narrow class spirit which has too often characterized the workingman in politics. But his very abuse of it proves how substantial his power was. Indeed it may be doubted whether he has ever since played so important a part in local government as he played in the early Middle Ages. When it is recalled that a large proportion of the members of the medieval House of Commons were delegates from the English towns it may even be asserted that his influence was not inconsiderable in national affairs.

Had England stood still where she was in the early Middle Ages, had the English towns preserved their splendid isolation, had roads not been built and commerce developed, had America and the Cape route to the Far East never been discovered, had the Renaissance failed to awaken men's minds and arouse their temporal ambitions, then the medieval craft guild might have survived unchanged to our own day, and many of the evils incidental to what we call industrial progress might have been avoided. But England moved before these powerful impulses along with all the rest of the Western world and the medieval craft guild moved with her. We need not call it progress, but we must certainly call it change. So far as the craftsman was concerned what affected him most were the increased facilities for trade. It enlarged his opportunities, opened to him a market for his commodities far beyond the limits of his town walls. This was a market which he could not control as he had controlled the town market, but one in which he was eager to compete. For such competition he found the guild organization rather a hindrance than a help. It hampered his action, restricted the free play of his individual enterprise and business acumen, limited his rate of progress to the pace of the slowest and stupidest of his confrères. Originally a fortress, it ultimately became a prison. And the consequence was that guild practices had to be modified and guild restrictions ignored.

For one thing the increasing complexities of the larger trade necessitated the distribution of the different parts of a business operation. It was no longer possible for the same craftsman to be at once a buyer, a manufacturer, and a merchant. Some, the more alert, became entrepreneurs, others, the less alert, remained at the bench to produce what another man would sell. The latter in fact became subservient to the former. In such wise from the democratic bosom of the craft guild differences and distinctions were born. While some of the abler masters ascended to the position of trading employers, others descended to a position hardly to be distinguished from that of wage-earners.

Furthermore, in proportion as the employer's interest in trade developed his interest in production as a guild monopoly diminished. He ceased to care much what particular group of craftsmen made his wares so long as they were made cheaply. Presently he discovered that there were workers outside the guild ranks altogether, country workers in fact, who could produce more cheaply. He began to draw upon them for his merchandise. And so he was instrumental in building up outside the town walls a competing source of supply. The guilds fought hard to retain their monopoly but in the long run had to confess defeat. Indeed many of their poorer members and many of their apprentices and journeymen went over to the enemy and moved to the country in order to take advantage of the freer conditions there. And the town authorities, alarmed at this wholesale exodus, took steps to prevent it by conning at the breach of those very guild regulations which in an earlier time they had been at such pains to enforce. The outcome was that in the towns as in the country districts a large industrial class developed who were not only not guildsmen but who ignored the guild law. It is true that the guilds survived. Some of them indeed survive to the present day. But by the end of the seventeenth century English industry had in large measure escaped their confines and they had ceased to have more than a social significance.

Time does not serve to trace all the steps in the transformation of the craft guilds, but long before the factory had displaced the older industrial arrangements many of the characteristics of our modern industrial system had developed. The craft guild had become an association of employers, a permanent wage-earning class had emerged, and the old solidarity of medieval industry had made way for conflicts over wages, hours, and conditions of work which differed only in degree from those of our own day.

From the point of view of the workingman in politics the significance of all these changes lies in the fact that his political influence in the Middle Ages has been exerted through the medium of his craft guild. It was as a guildsman that he had come to dominate the town government and through the town government had been able to make his will felt in the deliberations of the national House of Commons. Exclusion from the guild meant, therefore, exclusion from any further share either in local or in national politics. The political power which the early guildsmen had won for the whole body of industrial workers became the monopoly of the small group which came to monopolize the craft organization. Town governments were converted into narrow class oligarchies and the voice of the towns in parliament became the voice of the merchant employers. The average industrial worker was reduced to a political nonentity. He lost every legitimate means of political expression. The only kind of political action left to him was rebellion. We should expect to discover that when conditions got too bad he did rebel; yet it would be hard to point to any considerable uprising in the whole history of England before the Industrial Revolution which drew its strength from industrial discontent. There were now and then local strikes in particular trades, there were apprentice riots against foreign workmen and there were probably industrial elements present in such agrarian disturbances as the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the anti-inclosure tumults of the sixteenth century, but broadly speaking the English workingman of those times seems to have accepted his fate without violent remonstrance. During the civil wars of the seventeenth century, when much which was hidden in normal times was made manifest, he did for a moment manage to voice his discontent. Then we hear the downtrodden London weavers expounding the social compact to their betters and the London iron founders invoking the "laws of God, of Nature, and of Nations" in support of their just rights. Then the Levellers, led by a quondam London apprentice, denounced alike the king and the Commons and presented a program of democratic reform which would have raised the industrial worker at once to political equality with his task masters. But it all served no purpose, at least no immediate purpose, so far as the seventeenth-century workingman was concerned. Two centuries later radical labor agitators were to draw inspiration from the pamphlets of the Levellers, and Chartists were to borrow some of their formulas. Immediately the democratic panaceas of the civil-war period left the industrial worker where it found him—the prey to his masters, a supernumerary in the body politic.

After all, if he did not lack the spirit, he lacked the strength to assert his rights. It must not be forgotten that he constituted a small minority of the population of seventeenth-century or even of eighteenth-century England. Notwithstanding remarkable industrial development under the Tudors, the Stuarts, and the early Hanoverians, England was still, at the beginning of the last century, unmistakably an agricultural community. The average Englishman was still a tiller of the soil and though industrial workers were far more numerous than they had been they were relatively few in numbers, and that few scattered and unorganized. The growth of country industry was in itself a disintegrating force, for it involved the destruction of that compact, urban solidarity which had been one of the chief characteristics of medieval industry and one of its chief political assets. It is true that the workingman after his exclusion from the guild formed associations for his own protection which were the forerunners of the modern trade union. Had these succeeded in combining their forces as they did in Germany in the *Gesellen-verbände* or in France in the *confréries* they might perhaps have asserted themselves to some effect. As it was they were scarcely strong enough to hold their own in the face of guild opposition and could rarely accomplish so much as a successful local strike. Of political action they never dreamed.

If then we consider as a whole the political history of the workingman from the days when he first began to organize into craft guilds down to the days of the first factories we are forced to the conclusion that the last state of that man was worse than the first, that he did not progress, he went backward, that his political fortunes did not improve, they deteriorated. Possibly this was inevitable. We may if we like regard it as the run backward preliminary to the long leap forward. Anyway the fact is undeniable. We need not attempt to assign the blame, though it must appear that by and large the man who became the exploiting employer emerged from the same class as the man who became the down-trodden wage-earner. The earlier course of English industrial history on the whole supports the contention that the workingman is no more immune from the temptations of industrial prosperity than any other son of Adam.

About the middle of the eighteenth century there began in England that remarkable change in industrial technique which produced what we usually call the Industrial Revolution. Its general characteristics are sufficiently familiar. From the point of view of the workingman perhaps its most significant feature was the substitution of steam power for muscle power as the motive force in industry; for it was that substitution

which made possible the introduction of labor-saving machinery and changed the whole relation of the worker to his work. For one thing it tended to reduce the demand for his labor. One man with a machine could do what ten men had done before. For another it opened the door to new sources of labor supply. Women and even children could be utilized in the new processes to a degree never before dreamed of. To a considerable extent this increased labor supply was absorbed by the enormous expansion of industry occasioned by the Napoleonic Wars on the Continent. But even so there were more workers than there was work. This gave the employer the whip hand in the situation. He was able to exact long hours for low wages and so to reduce the earning capacity of the workingman to the level of a bare sustenance. Indeed, thanks to the public provision for the relief of the poor, he went even farther than that. After the so-called Speenhamland Act of 1785 the English local authorities practically guaranteed a certain minimum income to the workingman, based upon the size of his family and the price of corn. If he did not receive this minimum from his labors the balance was made up out of public funds. The employers often took advantage of this situation to pay their workers something less than a living wage and charged the deficit to the community at large. So extensive was this practice that it was estimated early in the nineteenth century that one-seventh of the population were in receipt of poor relief. This meant that the standard of living of the industrial worker was reduced to the lowest point compatible with keeping body and soul together. He was indeed hideously overworked, underfed, underclothed, and undersheltered. At the same time improper labor in the factory and in the mine was stunting the growth of his children and weakening the fecundity of his wife. The very circumstances which made his position intolerable robbed him of his strength to combat them.

From another point of view also the introduction of new machinery placed the workingman more completely than ever at the mercy of his employer. Under the old system the important factor in industry had been handicraft skill. The tools of trade had been simple and cheap, not inaccessible to the thrifty worker. Under the new system they were not only elaborate and expensive but they could not be run without the application of power which was more expensive still. No workingman could dream of furnishing himself with such equipment, nor could he on the other hand dream of competing against it with his old equipment. He had to work at another man's machine or he might as well not work at all. Of course if he did not work the machine could not run. But

that alternative was not in fact open to him. He had no accumulated resources upon which to subsist without working. The idleness of the machine might mean financial distress for the employer. For the worker it meant nothing less than starvation.

Yet from still another point of view the Industrial Revolution contributed mightily to the strength of the workingman and in the long run provided the means of his salvation. In the first place it greatly increased his numbers. If the initial effect of the introduction of labor-saving machinery was to reduce the number of available jobs, its ultimate effect by diminishing the costs of production was so greatly to increase the demand for manufactured commodities that English industrial activity expanded at a truly phenomenal rate. Probably the demand for industrial workers lagged behind the supply. Certainly the workingman got little of the profits from this enormous increase of business. But in any case the rapid development of industry drew to the great industrial centers a steady stream of immigrants which had the effect, in the course of the century, of converting smiling country England into the greatest industrial community on earth. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the industrial workers constituted a small and scattered minority of England's population. At the beginning of the twentieth century they constituted a large and a well-concentrated majority.

Probably the Industrial Revolution contributed as much to the strength of the workingman by concentrating his numbers as it did by increasing them. There was a great deal more to it than the introduction of the factory system, but certainly the development of the factory was one of its conspicuous features. The old industry had been in all its various changes a domestic industry. With a few interesting exceptions the workingman's home had been his workshop whether he worked for himself or for someone else. This arrangement had had its disadvantages even in the days when machines were driven by hand or foot power. The introduction of steam power made it impossible, for the only way in which steam power could be used economically was by employing one steam engine to drive a number of machines. That meant that machinery instead of being scattered over the countryside in peasants' cottages had to be arranged with reference to one common drive-shaft, in fact concentrated under one roof. Of necessity the concentration of the industrial workers followed. So we got the factory and around the factory the factory town. It was an ugly place, a dirty place, and an extremely unhealthy place. To the country immigrant it meant the loss of clean country air, of green fields and hedgerows, of primroses on

spring roadsides and skylarks in midsummer skies, and all these were grievous losses indeed. But it offered something pretty precious in exchange. It offered, in fact, human society. For the country life, notwithstanding all its charms, was a lonely and an isolated life, while the city life, for all its grime and misery, was teeming with social opportunity. The city brought men together who had never been together before. It provided contact between mind and mind. It made good schools possible; it made cheap newspapers possible; it made evening conferences on front doorsteps possible. Most important of all, it made industrial and political organization possible. And the discipline of the factory itself, harsh though it was, contributed to the same end. Men long accustomed to work by themselves learned performance how to work together. They discovered the value and the strength of co-operative effort. They developed *esprit de corps*. From this point of view the Industrial Revolution was a great constructive force both in society and in politics. By drawing great numbers of men together it created out of countless scattered individuals compact communities, united by their work, united by the proximity of their living, united in their scanty pleasures, united above all in their common miseries. Perhaps these results could have been achieved by other less painful methods. But it is doubtful whether they could have been achieved anything like so rapidly. On that account it may well be questioned whether the Industrial Revolution did the workingman as much harm as it did him good, or to state the matter more broadly, whether these seething cauldrons of social corruption and social energy which we call great industrial centers have not, in the general reckoning of human progress, been worth all that they have cost.

This much the Industrial Revolution assuredly did for the English workingman: it defined in unmistakable terms his grievances and it organized his strength to redress them. The grievances were the familiar ones—long hours and short wages. The organization at first naturally followed the lines laid down by the miserable wage-earners under the old régime—combinations of workers by trades. But progress was slow in organization because, when these feeble trade unions appealed to the government to redress their grievances they spoke to deaf ears, when they resorted to the alternative of the strike they broke the law. They did worse than break the law; they provoked the enactment of a new and more stringent law. In 1799 the employers were able to secure the passage of an act in Parliament forbidding the workingman to combine for higher wages or shorter hours, forbidding him to attend any meeting designed for

those purposes, forbidding him even to converse about such matters with his fellows. And that law remained on the statute books for twenty-five years. During that period though it did not altogether destroy the trade unions it effectually prevented their use as an instrument for the redress of industrial grievances. Indirectly it had a great deal to do with forcing the workingman to interest himself in politics, because it made clear to him that so long as political power remained a monopoly of the employing class the whole force of the law would be ranged upon the side of his exploiters.

It may seem surprising that up to this time no mention has been made of the general progress of political reform in England. That there was progress is undoubted, progress of the greatest importance to the workingman as well as to every other Englishman. But that the workingman as such contributed to it or played any very conscious part in it is more than doubtful. In the great seventeenth-century struggle between the crown and Parliament he was at most a helpless spectator with small prospect of immediate gain whichever side won. The Revolution of 1688 was accomplished without reference to him and, except in so far as his religious life was concerned, without direct relation to him. The rise of the cabinet in the eighteenth century took place in the clouds above his head. All these momentous changes were indispensable preliminaries to the democratization of the English government in the nineteenth century. They formed part of the precious political inheritance of the English workingman, but they came in the days before he entered the political scene.

There was, however, another movement for political reform in England which developed contemporaneously with the Industrial Revolution in which the workingman did play a part. This movement received its impulse in part from America and in part from the writings of the French political philosophers. It proceeded from the governing classes themselves, was not at all radical in its purposes, and it approached the venerable edifice of the English constitution with a reverence akin to idolatry. But it did admit the possibility of improvement and even advocated moderate changes in the direction of enlarging the representative character of the House of Commons.

With the outbreak of the French Revolution this reforming spirit was quickened and to some extent it was changed. It became rather more doctrinaire in character and lost something of its respect for prescriptive right. But except in a few instances it never drifted far from its ancient moorings. During the early days of the Revolution it expressed

itself in the organization of reform societies designed to agitate for such moderate changes in the English constitution as would bring it into closer accord with the principles enunciated in the American Declaration of Independence and the French Bill of Rights. Most of these societies were middle- and upper-class affairs recruited from among men who were already voters. But there was one of another order. Its founder was Thomas Hardy, a master-shoemaker who kept a shop in Piccadilly. Hardy's first notion was to form a society of the unrepresented masses. Later he enlarged his plan so as to exclude no one who was not physically or morally unfit. But by fixing the membership fees at a penny a week he left the door open for the workingmen, and workingmen came in in large numbers. This so-called London Corresponding Society was not the only one of its kind. There was another founded in Sheffield in 1791 by a few mechanics, which numbered at one time 2,400 members. And there were at least twenty or thirty others. Most of what is known about these popular organizations has been gathered from the testimony of their enemies. But it is clear enough that they set themselves resolutely against violent methods. Though they advocated an extension of the franchise to the working classes and a redistribution of parliamentary districts in accordance with the distribution of population, they proposed no more than could be secured by peaceful and constitutional courses. The only revolution which they desired was, in Wellington's famous phrase, "revolution by due process of law."

From the point of view of the political progress of the workingman the interesting thing about these popular societies is that they represent practically the first organized attempt by the modern workingman to secure a place for himself in the English body politic. How widespread the movement was it is difficult to say. Hardy at one time estimated the total membership of the London Corresponding Society at 20,000, but it is doubtful if it ever numbered half that many. Of the other popular societies scattered throughout England not even the wildest guess at their numbers is possible. This much, however, may be said on the authority of Francis Place, who probably knew more about the matter than anyone else, "that vast numbers of the thinking part of the working people joined the London Corresponding Society as they did other reforming Societies in various parts of England."

There is very little evidence to show any connection between the economic grievances of industrial workers and their political activity at this time, and none at all to connect their political clubs with their trade unions. No doubt they entertained hopes that political reform

would improve their lot. Who does not? But the impulses which directly provoked their interest in these matters appear to have been in the main the same as those which prompted their superiors. There is no appreciable difference between the program of a democratic club like the London Corresponding Society and that of an aristocratic club like the Friends of the People. Both alike were stirred less by considerations of necessity or of expediency than by principles of abstract justice. Both indorsed with equal enthusiasm the French Rights of Man. Both for the time forsook their stations in the social and economic order and stood together on the broad generous platform of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. It is to the great glory of them both that this was so, and one of the most hopeful signs of the times.

Unfortunately, however, this reform movement was destined to a very short life. At first the French Revolution had been acclaimed with enthusiasm in England. Many Englishmen regarded it as an attempt on the part of the French people to remodel their absolute government upon the English pattern. And the course of affairs in France up to June of 1791 on the whole justified that view of the matter. After that the increasing radicalism of the French movement alienated English sympathy. And in something like the way in which English sentiment toward Russia during the late war changed from enthusiastic indorsement of the overthrow of Czardom to universal condemnation of the Bolshevik régime, so it changed in the 1790's toward France as the program of Mirabeau and Lafayette gave place to the program of Danton and Robespierre. Already in 1790 Edmund Burke had thundered forth his famous defense of prescriptive right against the untested innovations from across the channel, and when war broke out against France in 1793 the great mass of English people, irrespective of class, followed Burke's lead. Political reform became at once associated in the popular mind with French propaganda and received in consequence short shrift. The government began a systematic persecution of the reform clubs; but though government agents were active, they were no more active than popular fury. One has only to recall the raging mobs which destroyed Priestly's laboratory in Birmingham and laid siege to Dr. Parr's library at Norwich to appreciate how completely the government's policy reflected the sentiments of the vulgar multitude. The cause of parliamentary reform was in fact put *hors de combat* for a whole generation to come. Of the reformers some were let off with a warning, many were tried for treason, one or two were executed, a few sent to drag out the weary residue of their days at Botany Bay. By and large the working-class leaders

suffered most severely. Hardy himself escaped the law, but he was not able to elude the mob. They attacked his house, broke his windows, and literally frightened his wife to death. His business was ruined and he spent the declining years of his life in abject poverty. As for the workingmen's reform clubs they all came to an inglorious end during the last five years of the century. As the initial effort of the English workingman in modern politics they deserve more attention than they have received, but so far as any practical results were concerned they accomplished nothing.

It is easy to abuse the governing classes for their intolerance, during these times, toward the feeble efforts of the workingman after better things political and industrial, but it must be remembered that they were times of war, that England was fighting for her very life against the greatest military genius that the world has perhaps ever seen, and that any movement calculated to distract her efforts from that grim business savored strongly of disloyalty if not of treason. Perhaps the employing classes exploited this war spirit for their own purposes, but we should not make the mistake of assuming that they called it forth. We know by experience how tense and intolerant the popular mind becomes under the strain of war and how apt it is to call bad names and to do cruel things. We have had our modern equivalents for the opprobrious terms which were hurled at our democratic forefathers who dared to speak of liberty in the heat of the fight. For that reason we can perhaps understand and to some extent even sympathize with those repressive measures which the English government in Napoleon's day thought it necessary to take.

CONYERS READ

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[*To be continued*]